

## **“A terrible beauty is born”: M. Butterfly as a Romantic Tragedy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents a dialectical interpretation of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* as a romantic tragedy. It is dialectical in the sense that the protagonist Gallimard, in his quest for/conquest of an ideal Butterfly, ultimately finds that he himself is his own object and opposite. It is romantic in the sense that, in his final unity with his opposite, Gallimard plays out the Hegelian negation of the negative and thus assures the purity of his spiritual subjectivity. In structure, accordingly, the main body of this paper consists of two parts. On one hand, Song Liling is taken as a pathetic figure, an unreflective puppet and instrument of nationalist ideology; he enacts the role of a perfect woman in Gallimard's imagination but finally presents himself as everything negative to the latter's fantasy. On the other hand, Gallimard is interpreted as a romantic hero in terms of the Hegelian definition of the romantic, with emphasis on the very process of Gallimard's anagnorisis (recognition), especially his arrival at his inner reconciliation through suicide, through the negation of the negative. That is, with his decisive rejection of reality, as embodied in the disrobed Song Liling and his final reconceptualization of fantasy as an absolute affirmation of his spiritual subjectivity, Gallimard becomes a precise incarnation of what Hegel calls "the romantic." Thus from Gallimard's reconstruction of his experiences arises a combination of the romantic and the tragic in the whole play.

**Key words:** subjectivity, M. Butterfly, reconstruction, Hegelian, romantic, tragic.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

-- William Butler Yeats ("Easter 1916," 93)

There is no such thing as the tragic, at least not as an essence. Rather, the tragic is a mode, a particular manner of destruction that is threatening or already completed: the dialectical manner.

-- Peter Szondi (*An Essay on the Tragic*, 55)

Since its premiere in 1988, David Henry Hwang's stage play *M. Butterfly* has received much critical attention in regard to its gender issues and postcolonial implications, so much so that the play proper as a romantic tragedy together with its essentially problematic individual subjectivity has long been unduly underestimated. Indeed, the subject matter of the play is drawn from a notorious spy scandal involving China and France, which occurred during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and came to light in 1986. The "real story" of international espionage, that of Bernard Boursicot (born 1944), a French diplomat, and Shi Pei Pu (1938-2009), a Chinese Beijing opera diva, is by its very nature quite attention-grabbing, and the

inscrutable confusion of gender/sex on the side of the French diplomatic clerk makes its appeal even more powerful to audiences. In his "Afterword," the playwright clearly offers his own postcolonial interpretation of the play and his motivation for deconstructing Giacomo Puccini's 1904 opera, *Madame Butterfly* (Hwang 95).<sup>1</sup> All these simple facts seem to have contributed to model the play into a rare sample of interconnected gender and postcolonial discourses.

In a 1990 essay, "Breaking the Butterfly: The Politics of David Henry Hwang," a pioneering study on *M. Butterfly*, Robert Skloot pertinently proposes this play's political implications in its cultural, gender and theatrical perspectives. Discussing the final suicide of Gallimard, Skloot carefully emphasizes the potential interpretations of Gallimard's transformation into Butterfly and asks, "Is it the fulfillment of a romantic melodrama or an ironic parody of it?" (Skloot 64) Such a rhetorical question, however, is left unanswered by Skloot and ever since has hardly given rise to any further consideration on the part of critics. Despite his deliberate suggestion of the finale's rich ambiguity, Skloot's verdict of the play either as a "melodrama" or a "parody" seems to have reflected and even influenced many critics' assessment that Gallimard is a pathetic loser and *M. Butterfly* is by no means a romantic tragedy. Dorinne K. Kondo, for instance, in her examination of discourses of gender and racial identity, postulates that Gallimard imprisons himself in his Oriental fantasy and ends his life with frantic suicide because of his refusal to acknowledge his own misinterpretation of Song Liling as a signifier and his own possible homosexual orientation. "His lack of imagination appears in part to be a homophobic retreat" (Kondo 44). Jareb Shimakawa looks into the gender and racial issues of the play in terms of space, both the theatrical space and the recognition space, and concludes that Gallimard entraps himself not only in an "enchanted space" but also in a "forced extroversion of all interiority, this forced injection of all exteriority." He is unable to tell himself as being apart from the "Other" and therefore is like a schizophrenic postmodern figure (Shimakawa 352). On the other hand, Song Liling is extremely flexible in his roles, floating among and thus subverting the multiple spaces of gender and race (Shimakawa 358). In a study into the entangled relationships between costume as a cultural code and bodily organ as a gender criterion, Chang Hsiao-hung proposes that, at the end of the play, "the fictivity of sex and gender itself becomes even more ambiguous"; thus Chang criticizes that the final reversal "fails to subvert the binary opposition of sex because the play avoids the complicated entanglements of gender/sex/desire" (Chang 145, 150). In her probe into the postcolonial/gender issues in the play, Chiu Kuei-Fen combines Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," that ambiguous space threatens the colonizer, with observations of Esther Newton and Karen Shimakawa on the play. Chiu wraps up her argument, saying that the ambiguity of transvestism is wrought with subversive potentials, yet Song Liling "looks like a woman, but not exactly a woman," and the play therefore is full of the ambiguous space of gender.

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Hwang also never hesitates to admit such an attempt, for example, to "link imperialism, racism and sexism" (Savran 127), or "to deal with some aspects of orientalism" (DiGaetani 141). He even declares that the play is "somewhat of a *thesis* in that sense" (Cooperman 367; italics added).

For Chiu, the postcolonial/gender issues in this play are quite significant because “Song’s successful transvestism does not necessarily mean that he has occupied the position of women” and “colonized men are not exactly equal to woman” (Chiu 68).

In past criticisms, in inverse proportion to, or even because of, such a persistent obsession with the sex/gender issues in *M. Butterfly*, there is, strangely enough, a conspicuous absence of serious critique on the political strangulation imposed upon Song Liling. Skloot has noticed that, despite its “bias against the Western world-view,” in the play the images of the East are “no more positive” than those of the West: “Certainly the sense of the East’s cruel use of power *against itself* in the scenes concerning the Cultural Revolution (and, with sad verification, in the June 1989 massacre of Chinese students in Beijing) are no more flattering than the West’s belief that the East ‘deep down, *wants* to be dominated’” (Skloot 62).<sup>2</sup> Yet again this observation has received little attention. In sharp contrast to Gallimard’s romantic quest for his Butterfly, Song Liling’s theatrical challenge and achievement only come to prove his role of political instrumentality. Negligence of these crucial points may lead one of the pivotal core themes of the play out of focus, the subjectivity of the individual: that is, how a “human being,” either man or woman, can subsist and keep his/her dignity and subjectivity in a colossal political apparatus. In the play, Song Liling succeeds in two ways: first, in Beijing and Paris, he takes full advantages of Gallimard’s fantasy for his political goal as a spy; and second, he inculcates, quite arrogantly, the court and the French people with the secrets of their own Oriental fantasy. He even disrobes himself and shows his naked body to Gallimard, his wretched victim. Yet, as this article argues, Song Liling’s astonishing achievement in his role as a spy at the nationalistic level only bespeaks the very death of his subjectivity as an individual; contrarily, the scandalous fiasco of Gallimard “the colonizer,” in a persistent self-reflection of the individual, witnesses the very expression of one’s spiritual subjectivity, bringing Gallimard to the tragic height of what Hegel calls “the romantic art” and, in a sudden transformation, like those of the common figures in W. B. Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” creating a “terrible beauty.”<sup>3</sup> The following discussion is thus divided into two aspects: Song Liling’s pathetic role as a political instrument and Gallimard’s tragic role as a romantic protagonist.

## 2. SONG LILING AS A PATEHTIC FIGURE

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<sup>2</sup> To be precise, “the East” here no doubt refers to the Communist regime of China, and this simple fact may partly explain the relative reticence of academic circle concerning this particular play in mainland China.

<sup>3</sup> With “Easter 1916” Yeats no doubt is celebrating the romantic energy of revolution, but not without ambiguity, which finds its obvious expression in a skeptical line in the same poem: “Was it needless death after all?” (Yeats 95). The victims of the Easter Uprising in 1916, all ordinary people, in Richard Ellmann’s words, “had suddenly found their heroic opposites, not like Yeats by efforts and discipline, but by the sudden violence of a great action” (quoted in Allison 193.) Yeats’ ambivalent attitude toward the heroic sacrifice of the Easter Uprising sounds not unlike Skloot’s reluctance to classify *M. Butterfly* as a romantic “tragedy,” taking it, instead, simply as a romantic “melodrama” or a “parody”; this will be discussed later.

Song Liling's sorry plight lies not only in his failure to "occupy the position of women" or his being "not exactly equal to woman," but also in his almost perfect performance as a secret agent, which ironically reveals his sheer function as a political instrument, totally deprived of the autonomy of an individual. He has a sad family background: his mother was, in his own words, "a prostitute along the Bundt before the Revolution" (82), that is, a victim of the male-colonizers. (Is he a half-breed?) He is a performer of Beijing opera and is capable of singing Italian opera; Gallimard is enamored with him/her while Song is singing the death scene from Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* at the German ambassador's house at Beijing in 1960; it is, indeed, a rare capability to master these two arts at once. With both his proletariat background and his professional proficiency, Song Liling is a well-chosen secret agent for the Chinese intelligence bureau and in this mission he indeed reaches the zenith of his performance career, as he tells Gallimard: "You were my greatest ... acting challenge" (63). Here an issue of gender identification is implicated: Is Song gay? If he is, well, his secret mission goes hand in hand with his personal gender propensity; if not, then his sacrifices for his country are extremely incredible. Of course, the answer to this question may not be so clear-cut.<sup>4</sup> Near the end of the play, Song proposes to undress himself in front of Gallimard, on one hand, to show his true body as "a man" but, on the other, not to accept that he is "just a man" (80); he even tries to draw Gallimard's hand up to his face, in the hope of proving to Gallimard that "I am your butterfly" (89). Indeed, Song's stripping himself in front of Gallimard, as Kate McInturff proposes, might be well read as "the revelation of Song's true and undisguised identity" whereas the reprise of "his feminine character" is "an expression of Song's desire for Gallimard" (McInturff 86); it is a Butterfly's desire for her Pinkerton. Yet the play ends with the very image of Song Liling, smoking a cigarette, "as a man, staring at the dead Gallimard" (92). All these seem to point to Song Liling's propensity for bisexuality. But this is beside the question. The point is: whether homosexual or bisexual, Song is no doubt a man making a praiseworthy contribution to the Chinese Communist Party and government; yet how does the party-government view Song? Or more importantly, how does Song see his relationship with his own party-country? Herein lies the core issue of the identification and subjectivity of an individual.

In the world of *M. Butterfly*, China is already "liberated" and Gallimard's residual Oriental fantasy is fully manipulated by Song Liling; therefore, it is quite ironical that the oppression imposed upon Song Liling comes from China, not from the Western world. While Song never tries to conceal his role as the spokesman for Chinese culture, in his backstage encounter with Gallimard, he straightforwardly calls the latter "White man" (20) and "an adventurous imperialist" (21). In the

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<sup>4</sup> While most critics may tend to take Song as gay, Kate McInturff offers a significant interpretation of Song as an ambiguous performer, since s/he is a male diva of Beijing opera: "Song's falsetto enacts both her multiple desires and her multiple falsifications or betrayals. ... Song betrays Chin by engaging in a homosexual relationship with Gallimard and betrays Gallimard in her role as a spy. ... These betrayals are acceptable to Gallimard and Chin only in so far as they treat Song's disguise as a screen that masks her true self and as one that she adopts in order to please them, not herself" (McInturff 86).

liberated China, Western people are liable to blunt mockery, so much so that Gallimard thinks that Chinese people are “incredibly arrogant”; Madame Su’s boast that “We are a very old civilization” even invites Helga’s sour rebuttal: “I never know if she’s talking about her country or herself” (18). In other words, in the liberated China, Song Liling stands at an absolute vantage point. But it is not any foreign country but his own domestic government that imposes troubles upon Song Liling, the national apparatus being embodied in the role of Comrade Chin and the invisible Comrade Kang behind the scene.

In Act One, Scene Five, Comrade Chin shows up, according to Gallimard’s recollection, as the role of Suzuki in *Madame Butterfly* to rebuke Cio-Cio-San for her worship of foreign people: Pinkerton is a “foreign devil” (12) and “You’re Japanese!” (13). The stark nationalism, like a sacred cow, brooks no doubt and sets the basis for Song Liling’s later actions to the end. Nevertheless, as an individual, Song has serious discord with Comrade Chin. In her second appearance, at the very end of Act Two, Scene Three, Comrade Chin intrudes herself into and calls a halt to the meeting of Song and Gallimard. The next scene then witnesses Comrade Chin’s giving an order for a secret mission, calling into question Song’s transvestism even at home, reminding him that homosexuality is not allowed in China, and even bluntly calling all actors “weirdos”: “My mother tells me actors are like gamblers or prostitutes or...” (48). In the face of such humiliation from his own political supervisor, Song cannot but swallow the insult, with only a low-pitched refutation after she leaves: “What passes for a woman in modern China” (49). Song’s refutation may well suggest his affirmation of the traditional femininity as well as his possible homosexual propensity, which is obviously oppressed by the nationalistic ideology. It seems that Song opposes not only the oppression of sexuality but, more importantly, that of the political ideology as well. Thematically, they are closely linked. Song once tells Gallimard, in Act One, Scene Eight, that “she” can distance *herself* from *her* people and that “‘Art for the masses’ is a shitty excuse to keep artists poor” (21). This is indeed a serious complaint against his fatherland in front of a foreigner. In the 1960s such behavior was no doubt an “antirevolutionary” act because it is an outspoken charge against the official literature and art policy decided by Chairman Mao in his “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art”: “Our stand is that of the proletariat and of the masses” (Mao 251). However, does Song turn into a traitor?

The opposite is true. Song’s candidness in front of Gallimard may signify betraying his country, but such a confession from the heart may well be one of his strategies to win Gallimard’s sympathy with his artistic ideology, with his ultimate purpose being to carry out the mission given by “the Great Proletariat State” (48). Song’s deliberate intention to maintain a distance from his own people, in terms of Slavoj Žižek’s observations, is the very premise upon which ideology works:

...the distance from it, far from signalling the limitation of the ideological machine, functions as its positive *condition of possibility*. ... an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it, that there is a

rich human person beneath it: ‘not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person’ is *the very form of ideology*, of its ‘practical efficiency’. Close analysis of even the most ‘totalitarian’ ideological edifice inevitably reveals that, not everything in it is ‘ideology’ (in the popular sense of the ‘politically instrumentalized legitimization of power relations’): in every ideological edifice, there is a kind of ‘trans-ideological’ kernel, since, if an ideology is to become operative and effectively ‘seize’ individuals, it *has* to batten on and manipulate some kind of ‘trans-ideological’ vision which cannot be reduced to a simple instrument of legitimizing pretensions to power (notions and sentiments of solidarity, justice, belonging to a community, etc.).... The point is thus not that there is no ideology without a trans-ideological ‘authentic’ kernel but rather, that *it is only the reference to such a trans-ideological kernel which makes an ideology ‘workable’*. (*The Plague of Fantasies* 20-21)

A familiar instance is: “Nazi” is not only what we know in terms of appearance; under its appearance is an earnest relish for classic canons and operas; it is this very reference to the trans-ideological kernel that makes the Nazi ideology “workable.” Another example in our daily life is: “I have to frequent the bars not only for enjoyment but also for business.” Here business becomes the “trans-ideological kernel” of one’s going to the bars. The same reason holds true to Song’s case. Song keeps himself apart from his own people and proletariat policy and therefore creates a trans-ideological vision, which disarms himself and Gallimard, converting them both into believing that Song is not an instrument of the state apparatus. Yet it is this very self-distancing from the people and the state that enables him to achieve the instrumental goal given by the state apparatus.

The instrumentality of Song Liling reveals itself not only in his being dehumanized by the state apparatus but also in his attempt to conceal his own true status with such a trans-ideological kernel. As mentioned earlier, Song as a secret agent is already seriously humiliated by Comrade Chin who esteems him as nothing more than a gambler and a prostitute. But the worst is still to come. In Act Two, Scene Nine, in 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, the successful secret agent Song Liling is brought out for a public trial in a street demonstration, in which the most vigorous and earnest accuser is the same Comrade Chin who gave him his secret missions. Song is compelled to confess that “I was the plaything for the imperialists” and “I let him put it up my ass,” crying repeatedly “I want to serve the people!” (20-21). Cultural Revolution may well be taken as a “time ... out of joint,” an age in which “madmen lead the blind.” Is it simply God’s doing? Is there no one to blame? God and history may know no individuals, indeed. Yet, as an individual, a very victim of this Chinese shoah, what has Song Liling learned from it? After four years of hard labour in Hunan, in 1971, Song is once again summoned by Comrade Chin for a secret mission in Paris, since Gallimard has already gone home. Even at this moment, when Song mentions his former contribution to the country, he only receives a flat refusal from Comrade Chin: “Serve the Revolution?”

Bullshit!” (71) He is ordered to go to Paris, “Without a cent in your pocket” (72) and “be a pervert for Chairman Mao!” (73) Poor and humiliated as he is, Song Liling willingly does everything as he is told. Such a socialist “model hero” is indeed a propagandist myth, but this new myth created by David Henry Hwang seems a mockery rather than praise for Chinese nationalism.

In Paris, Song Liling puts on a most heroic show as a Chinese patriot, but he is at once a most pathetic and farcical figure as an individual; he totally lacks the potentiality for *anagnorisis* so characteristic of a tragic hero. After fifteen years of cozy life in France, the espionage is brought to light and he is accordingly brought to court. Yet, strangely enough, in the court scene, Act Three, Scene One, Song Liling behaves like anything but a defendant; on the contrary, he patronizes the French judge in the court and the Western audience in the theatre as well. The judge says to Song, quite humbly: “There is one thing that the court – indeed, that all of France – would like to know.” “Fire away,” answers Song, in a short imperative tone (81). It is indeed Song himself that really fires away. He talks volubly about how he learned from his own mother, a prostitute, his knowledge of foreigners and how he himself deceived and satisfied Gallimard in their sexual intercourse in accordance with his own “rules,” “in service to my country”; “Rule One is: Men always believe what they want to hear... ‘This is my first time’ – ‘That’s the biggest I’ve ever seen.’” He even mocks the judge, saying that “You’ve maybe heard those phrases a few times in your own life, yes, Your Honour?” Strangely enough, the scoffed French judge remains unmoved and wants him to go on, and Song does go on: “As soon as a Western man comes into contact with the East – he’s confused,” and so on and so forth (82). In the play as a whole, Gallimard is presented as *the* representative of the Western world, whereas Song is that of the Oriental. Their relationship thus manifests a confrontation of two civilizations. The real Song Liling as an individual is simply nonexistent: he never recalls his past experiences, no matter how the state apparatus of his own country treated him; never for a moment does he harbor the idea of complaint, regret or even forgiveness. His inner world is totally empty, not to mention a total inability regarding self-reflection. In total accord with Hwang’s postcolonial discourse in the “Afterword,” Song Liling can be nothing but a mouthpiece for the Chinese state apparatus. In other words, the instrumentality of the state apparatus is the very *raison d’être* of Song Liling, the very reason for his pathetic existence.

It is now not difficult to perceive how Song Liling, after showing his penis to Gallimard, fails to understand the latter’s comment that he is “just a man.” Exposing his own penis can only prove that he has a penis and nothing more. The way Song proves “himself” only reveals his deep obsession with physical appearances and his serious lack of subjectivity as a human being. After showing his own authentic “self,” that is, his naked “body,” Song still thinks that he is “not just a man,” that he can pick the costume and accordingly the status of Butterfly. Gallimard points out his misprision: “You showed me your true self. When all I loved was the lie. A perfect lie, which you let fall to the ground – and now it’s old and soiled” (89). Song Liling is incapable of understanding that in his successful performance of Butterfly he is a “body without organ.” Gallimard never takes Song as a man because he never saw him naked; yet, after the exposé, Song still thinks

that Gallimard can take him for a woman. The perversion of Song's gender identity finds its expression in his fetishism: the authenticity of male gender identity lies in the penis, and that of the Butterfly in the costume. But material existence is what Gallimard intends to shake off and transcend at the end of the play. In the face of Gallimard's abdication of physical existence and ultimate identification with the Butterfly, Song Liling's final words "Butterfly? Butterfly" (93) adequately testify to his intellectual ignorance. He never understands the Butterfly with whom Gallimard identifies, not even the Butterfly he himself once successfully performed. The last image of Song Liling on the stage is an empty gesture: standing, with a cigarette in his mouth, puffing smoke; he is "just a man," a man with a penis, no more or less.

### 3. GALLIMARD AS A ROMANTIC HERO

As a whole, *M. Butterfly* presents the very process of Gallimard's *anagnorisis*, his development from ignorance to knowledge, in sharp contrast to Song Liling's total blindness of perception. The play proper unfolds itself and ends in the form of Gallimard's soliloquy in the prison cell. Like Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, this play is a memory play of its protagonist. Yet differing from Tom's involuntary recollection in *The Glass Menagerie*: "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (Williams 237), Gallimard's recollection is a purposeful search, an intended rewriting of his personal history: in the prison cell, he repeatedly reviews his own story, "always searching for a new ending, one which redeems my Honour" (4). Moreover, in this very re-conceptualization, the framework of *M. Butterfly* comes close to that of Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. Both Gallimard and Oedipus do wrong in ignorance, falling in love with and begetting the wrong persons: Oedipus and Jocasta have two sons and two daughters, while Gallimard and Song Liling also have a son. The tragic stories of both Oedipus and Gallimard are already completed/fated even before the two plays unfold themselves. This is to say, what is unfolded in both plays is the discovery of the protagonists' tragedies, the process of their self-recognition. And in Oedipus's search for the murderer as well as in Gallimard's search for his Butterfly, the actions of both plays end with *peripeteia* (reversal), in every sense of the word. In the end, Oedipus blinds and exiles himself whereas Gallimard kills himself: they punish themselves, taking the whole responsibility for their own ignorance.

Gallimard's (self-)recognition and suicide constitute the pivot of this play and have elicited diverse interpretations. In the final scene, Gallimard claims that he has succeeded in his search for "a new ending" to his story "by returning to the world of fantasy" where he "first met her":

I have a vision. Of the Orient. That, deep within its almond eyes, there are still women. Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth.... Death with honour is better than life.... life with dishonour. (*He sets himself center*



*stage, in a seppuku position*) The love of a Butterfly can withstand many things – unfaithfulness, loss, even abandonment. But how can it face the one sin that implies all others? The devastating knowledge that, underneath it all, the object of her love was nothing more, nothing less than ... a man. (*He sets the tip of the knife against his body*) It is 19--. And I have found her at last. In a prison on the outskirts of Paris. My name is Rene Gallimard – also known as Madame Butterfly. (92-93)

This highly ambiguous ending, as Robert Skloot proposes, can be variously interpreted through an actor's performance. One of the interpretations is a moral lesson that "a fool will be destroyed by his own folly," another is that "our own fantasy is always stronger than someone else's reality," and still the other, and the most subversive one, is "that we are more likely to be imprisoned by our imaginations than be liberated by them, or that, in more postmodern parlance, we usually behave the way we do because it has been culturally imagined for us already" (Skloot 61-62). What "has been culturally imagined" may well denote the so-called Orientalism which finds its expression and criticism in David Henry Hwang's "Afterword" and, even more straightforwardly, in Song Liling's harangue in the court scene as mentioned earlier. On the other hand, as Chang points out, in the play, Hwang pushes aside the issue of Gallimard's sexuality. Therefore, not only does the play "keep the sexual imperialist parallels of West/East and men/women at the center" but its protagonist "is finally left on the stage less as a repressed homosexual than as a laughing stock who has not even learned about the truth of his lover's sex after twenty years" (Chang 747). A similar viewpoint is proposed by Slavoj Žižek: "Doesn't weird and unconvincing plot conceal and point out at once the fact: we're dealing with a case of transvestism and homosexuality? It is an obvious dishonesty of the film to refuse to admit this simple fact." Yet Žižek immediately calls into question the elucidation of homosexuality: "how can a hopeless love between the hero and his partner, a man dressed up as a woman, realize the notion of heterosexual love far more 'authentically' than a 'normal' relationship with a woman?" (*The Metastases of Enjoyment* 108)

The point is that, either heterosexuality or homosexuality is established on the very basis of a man-woman relationship and therefore is unable to avoid the so-called "sexual imperialist parallels" of men/women. For Žižek, even in the graceful appearance of courtly love, man's service for the lady is a kind of camouflage to provide the lady with fantasy-substance for identity, in terms of the femininity constructed by her relationship with the man as she sees it, by her perceiving herself as an object for his desire. Thus, in its protest against patriarchal domination, feminists at once "undermine the fantasy-support of their 'feminine' identity" (*The Metastases of Enjoyment* 108). Man or woman, everyone has fantasies. The point is:

Once the sexual relationship is taken as a parallel, reciprocal, voluntary fellowship or contract, the fantasy matrix firstly seen in courtly love then has its mighty influence. Why? Only if the sexual difference is a Real that resists symbolization, sexual relationship is doomed to keep a kind

of asymmetrical non-relationship, in which the Other, our partner, is the Thing, an inhuman partner before becoming a subject; accordingly, the sexual relationship is unable to become a symmetrical relationship between pure subjects. In the contract principle of the bourgeoisie, symmetry is to be found only in the form of the *perverse* – the masochistic – contract, in which, paradoxically, the symmetrical form of the contract is established on the relationship of domination. It is no accident that in the so-called alternative sexuality (“sado-masochistic” lesbian and gay partners), the master-slave relationship reemerges with a revenge mentality, including all the elements of the masochistic theatre. In other words, we are far from inventing a new formula to take the place of love matrix of courtly love. (*The Metastases of Enjoyment* 108-109.)

To put it in another way, Gallimard and Song may be simply taken as two gays, and their man-woman relationship in the past twenty years turns totally upside down in the end of the play. But these “gendered” issues have little to do with Gallimard’s “devastating knowledge”: “underneath it all, the object of her love was nothing more, nothing less than ... a man.” The point is not that Song is “a man” or a woman, but that he is “*nothing more, nothing less than ... a man*” (italics added). After showing Gallimard his own penis, Song Liling insists that “*I’m your fantasy!*” Gallimard answers, “You’re as real as hamburger” (90). Song Liling’s existence as “*nothing more, nothing less than ... a man*” renders fantasy totally impossible. By showing Gallimard his own naked body, his penis, Song Liling intends to show off his symbolic male subjectivity. Ironically, as discussed earlier, while carrying out the secret missions given by the state apparatus, Song is a Butterfly without penis/subjectivity. Song Liling’s dilemma in regard to promoting his relationship with Gallimard to one of the “symmetry of pure subjects” on the one hand and to keep his fantasy of being a Butterfly on the other clearly reveals his own serious lack of self-consciousness. It is, of course, also possible that Song is himself an unconscious sado-masochist gay: such being the case, then his imposing insistence that “*I’m your fantasy!*” can be taken as a doting begging, a desperate cry of such a perversity as well.

However, Gallimard refuses Song Liling and chooses to identify himself with pure fantasy. He knows well that his whole life is but a laughing stock for the public. The very object of his search is nothing but himself. Žižek comments: he “‘regresses’ from the object-choice to an immediate identification with the object; the only way out of the insoluble deadlock of this identification is suicide *quo* the ultimate *passage à l’acte*. By his suicidal act the hero makes up for his guilt, for his rejection of the object when the object was offered to him outside the fantasy-frame” (*The Metastases of Enjoyment* 107-108). Despite his strong argument, Žižek’s assertion of Gallimard’s “guilt” is quite dubious. In the filmic version directed by David Cronenberg, an eroticized version on which Žižek bases his argument, Song Liling (acted by John Lone) is presented as a submissive and touching figure. In the prison van, Song even kneels down, naked, to ask for Gallimard’s reacceptance. But Song Liling’s arrogant harangue on Orientalism and

his secret of success in the court scene of the stage play all disappear in the film, together with Song's public trial on the street during the Cultural Revolution. In other words, the filmic version is highly de-politicized and focused on Song's homosexual propensity and his genuine love for Gallimard.<sup>5</sup> The last image of Song in the film is a pitiful figure at a loss, sitting on the plane leaving Paris for China. Yet in the original dramatic text, there is an imagined dialogue between Gallimard in the prison cell and Song Liling on the plane:

Gallimard: [...] I could forget all that betrayal in an instant, you know. If you'd just come back and become Butterfly again.

Song: Fat chance. You're here in prison, rotting in a cell. And I'm on a plane, winging my way back to China. Your President pardoned me of our treason, you know.

Gallimard: Yes, I read about that.

Song: Must make you feel ... lower than shit. (63)

Although this imagined dialogue appears in Act Two, Scene Seven, it is an extension of Gallimard's impression and recollection of Song puffed up with arrogance since the court scene to the end of the play proper. In Gallimard's final recognition, Song Liling is nothing but a wrong object for his love, "a cad, a bounder" (92). Gallimard's suicide should not, as Žižek proposes, be ascribed to his "rejection of the object when the object was offered to him outside the fantasy-frame," his attempt to "make up for his guilt"; he owes Song nothing.

Why then should Gallimard kill himself? He sacrifices everything for love, from love for Song to self-love, and his final recognition is that "death with honour is better than life with dishonour." Honour and love are two of the most conspicuous Romantic themes: both of them embody the infinite extension of one's subjectivity. Put in Hegel's words, "The measure of honour thus does not depend on what the man actually is but on what this idea of himself is" (Hegel 558). The combination of honour and love goes even further to manifest the essence of the Romantic:

While in honour the fundamental characteristic is personal subjectivity envisaged in its absolute independence of the person, in love the supreme thing is rather the surrender of the person to an individual of the opposite sex, the sacrifice of one's independent consciousness and one's separate self-awareness; the sacrifice is made because one feels compelled to have one's knowledge of oneself solely in the consciousness of the other. In this respect love and honour are opposed

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<sup>5</sup> Other interesting differences between the film version and the stage play include the former's exclusion of the play as Gallimard's rewriting his own story and "the nature of theatrical contact," especially, at the very end, "the substitution of the prisoner audience (in the film) for the live audience (at the play) [which] neglects the film audience as a player. While the scene has an impact in the film, and is held up by some to be a very successful aspect of the film version, the film version loses the active drive that the play derives from its live audience (an audience that has been cultivated, wooed, and cajoled throughout the evening in the theatre). The audience is new to us and to Gallimard." (Ditor and Selman, 232-233)

to one another. But conversely we many regard love as also the realization of what was already implicit in honour, because honour needs to see itself recognized, and the infinity of the person accepted, in another person. (Hegel 562)

In real life, Gallimard is a loser, a laughing stock for France and the whole world: neither his love nor his honour can be “recognized.” His answer is not to be found in the world “as real as hamburger”; death seems the only choice left for him.

Gallimard’s choice of suicide distinguishes him from Oedipus. There are similarities between *M. Butterfly* and *Oedipus*, as already mentioned, but these two plays have totally different endings. Far from Oedipus’s self-blinding and self-exile, Gallimard’s suicide as a resolution to his predicament is an assertion of his romantic spirit, an affirmation of the significance of death, that is, death as “the negation of the negative.” For Hegel,

In romantic art, on the contrary, death is only a perishing of the *natural* soul and *finite* subjectivity, a perishing (related negatively only to the inherently negative) which cancels nullity and thereby is the means of liberating the spirit from its finitude and disunion as well as spirituality reconciling the individual person with the Absolute. For the Greeks what was affirmative was only the life united with natural, external and mundane existence, and death therefore was just a negation, the dissolution of immediate reality. But in the romantic outlook, death has the significance of negativity, in the sense of the negation of the negative, and therefore changes all the same into the affirmative as the resurrection of the spirit out of its mere natural embodiment and the finitude which is inadequate to it. The grief and death of the dying individual reverses into a return to self, into satisfaction, blessedness, and that reconciled affirmative existence which spirit can attain only through the killing of its negative existence in which it is barred from its proper truth and life. (Hegel 523-524)

By way of calling a total end to one's physical life, death becomes a thorough negation of the abyss of the human finitude and disunion; it is a spiritual reconciliation of “the individual person with the Absolute.” Similar spiritual reconciliation also finds its expression in Oedipus, not in *Oedipus the King*, but in *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus in his self-exile shakes off the dust of his own homeland and leads a wandering life in foreign countries; that is, he chooses the company of the Furies so as to find his own purgation and spiritual reconciliation. Miraculously, he finds his eyesight again – not only does he no more pollute the land under his feet, but he also brings bliss to his hosts. Yet a significant difference still looms large between the spiritual reconciliation in Oedipus and the romantic one in one’s pursuit of absolute subjectivity. Thus Hegel goes further to expound:

Attempts have been made to find a Christian tone here: the vision of a

sinner whom God pardons and a fate endured in life but compensated with bliss in death. But the Christian religious reconciliation is a transfiguration of the soul which, bathed in the spring of eternal salvation, is lifted above its deeds and existence in the real world, because it makes the heart itself into the grave of the heart (yes, the spirit can do this), pays the imputations of earthy guilt, with its own earthy individuality and now holds itself secure against those imputations in the certainty of its own eternal and purely spiritual bliss. On the other hand, the transfiguration of Oedipus always still remains the Greek transfer of consciousness from the strife of ethical powers, and the violations involved, into the unity and harmony of the entire ethical order itself. (Hegel 1219-1220)

Here lies the core of the romantic: only in the absolute spirit of subjectivity, that is, only in the inner world, not in the ethical order, nor in the external and objective relationships, can one find his genuine unity and harmony. Such is what is well articulated at the very last moment of the play. Gallimard, a typical representative of Western male chauvinism at the beginning, now identifies himself with the target of his quest, a woman “willing to sacrifice” herself for love. The last moment of seppuku validates his final recognition: “My name is Rene Gallimard – also known as Madame Butterfly.” The sexual/gender disunion is thus totally cancelled in his inner reconciliation: through the action of seppuku he thereby negates and transcends the ethical and political values and physical existence in this world. In a very Hegelian sense, his spirit thus “holds itself secure against those imputations in the certainty of its own eternal and purely spiritual bliss.” Rene Gallimard and Madame Butterfly become one: this bespeaks not the union between a man and a woman, nor even what Skloot denotes as the “androgynous fulfillment” (Skloot 61); rather, this is the inner reconciliation of a human being – male or female alike. And such an absolute subjectivity of the spirit is quite ungendered.

To return to the play as a tragedy: the play’s ending with Song Liling’s survival and Gallimard’s death seems to justify Hwang’s attempt to reverse the opposing relationship of the West and the East in the traditional Madame Butterfly story. Still, in a theatrical sense, we may ask as the performance is over: with whom may the audience mostly sympathize, Song or Gallimard? In “The Theatrical Language: Staging Choices and Their Meanings,” a workshop held in April 1997, Daniel Chen, who played the role of Song Liling, commented: “Once the play is over and Song storms off and Gallimard has his monologue at the end, it just makes him such a martyr ... I don’t see how many people will sympathize with Song. You walk away and think, ‘Gee, that’s so sad he killed himself.’ And Song just walks away.” And Rachel Ditor went further to assert: Gallimard’s pain “occludes the triumph of Song’s empowerment” (Ditor and Selman 236). It is Gallimard, not Song Liling, who has the final words at the end: Song’s “Butterfly? Butterfly?” only suggests his own everlasting ignorance. In a certain sense, Gallimard becomes a “martyr” because he, like Thomas Becket in T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, finds his own self by losing it: “the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it,

for he has found freedom in submission to God” (Eliot 199), Gallimard’s “God” being his imagination. True or false, the core of religion lies in one’s belief and, in Gallimard’s case, it is his belief in the love of a Butterfly which “can withstand many things – unfaithfulness, loss, even abandonment.” He finds as well that “the truth demands a sacrifice” (92), that is, his self-sacrifice.

Yet Gallimard’s “martyrdom” is quite different from Beckett’s. Becket is a not a tragic hero simply because he is not only a martyr *per se* but a martyr for the people and the Church as well. It is, indeed, because of this very martyrdom that *Murder in the Cathedral* ends with a celebration: “Therefore, O God, we thank Thee / Who hast given such blessing to Canterbury” (Eliot 221). But Gallimard enjoys no glorious compensation like this; his downfall is sheer downfall. In Peter Szondi’s insightful observation, as partly quoted in the beginning of this paper, the tragic is essentially dialectical. Szondi continues to assert:

There is only *one* tragic downfall: the one that results from the unity of opposites, from the sudden change into one’s opposite, from self-division. But it is also the case that only the demise of something that should not meet its demise, whose removal does not allow the wound to heal, is tragic. The tragic contradiction may not be sublated in a superordinate sphere, whether immanent or transcendent. If this is the case, then either the object of destruction was something trivial, which as such eludes the tragic and offers itself to the comic, or the tragic is already vanquished in humor, covered up in irony, or surmounted in faith. (Szondi 55-56).

The inner reconciliation of the romantic, as proposed by Hegel, no doubt belongs to “a superordinate sphere.” Death is of course nothing trivial, but Gallimard’s romantic gesture of seppuku still is unable to escape a slight sense of irony: this may partly explain Skloot’s reluctance to call it a romantic “tragedy,” as mentioned earlier. Tragedy does not simply generate from a man’s downfall. For Hegel, Sophocles’s *Antigone* is one of the most perfect plays because in it “the public law of the state is set in conflict over against inner family love and duty to brother” (Hegel 464). The collision between Antigone and Creon, as well known and held, is one between two good persons. Both “the public law of the state” and the “family love and duty to brother” belong to the dimension of ethics and, so to speak, are innate to the dialectic of ethics itself. In Szondi’s words, for Hegel, “the tragic and the dialectic coincide”; “the tragic process is the dialectic of ethics” (Szondi 16, 18). What Gallimard at last comes to face is just such an inner collision, a “consciousness of oneself, yet as something hostile” (Hegel, qtd. in Szondi 17) and the inner reconciliation of the divided self only finds itself in the total elimination of his self, in death. If Gallimard the tragic hero has so often been taken as a laughing stock, one may well say that it is because he is a romantic hero living in a very unromantic era, an era in which what is perhaps the most tragic aspect of Gallimard lies in the very fact that even in his desperate determination to become a tragic character he still remains somewhat comic for many people. Here looms large a combination of the romantic and the tragic in this unique play: *M. Butterfly* is Gallimard’s recollection and rewriting of his disastrous experiences into a

“romantic tragedy” which in turn, partly at least, still “eludes the tragic and offers itself to the comic.” To be brief, even in his desperate attempt to rescue himself from the fiasco in real life, Gallimard also suffers “the sudden change into one’s opposite” for the public audience. As the dialectics persists forever, Gallimard meets his “only *one* tragedy downfall” in a double sense.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Gallimard’s romantic tragedy, despite the playwright’s postcolonial comment on his own protagonist, is still an essential and therefore ineluctable premise. In contrast to Gallimard’s tragic experience of development from impotence and ignorance to disillusionment and recognition, Song Liling’s callous and pathetic existence as a political instrument only betokens everything negative in Gallimard’s world. In his suicide, Gallimard accomplishes his negation of the negative and finds his own resurrection in the absolute subjectivity of the spirit. Such an inner reconciliation has to face certain doubts and even derision in the real world, yet Gallimard’s choice transcends any outsider’s comment. In his own way he insists on the idea(l) that “Death with honour is better than life with dishonour” and, for Hegel, “the measure of honour thus does not depend on what the man actually is but on what this idea of himself is” (Hegel 558). Whether or not we agree, *Madame Butterfly* is Gallimard’s final self-identity and recognition. Such is the metamorphosis of caterpillar into butterfly, a significant symbolism not even found in Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* itself.

Indeed, we can well agree that any attempt to describe and fix “the concept of the self ... is an illusory task” (Zamora 49), a sheer fantasy; yet we can even more assuredly assert that at the end of the play Gallimard has traversed such a fantasy: well aware of his being a laughing stock in the beginning, he has undertaken a whole process of self-rewriting/self-reconstruction and has come to choose fantasy. Self-consciousness together with desperate action distinguishes Gallimard from his historical and theatrical counterparts at once: Bernard Boursicot survives his imprisonment, remaining a weird joke in the real world, while Song Liling, as already discussed earlier, shows himself as nothing but a political instrument and melodramatic mouthpiece of an authoritative regime. In terms of the dualism of Descartes, Walter Benjamin affirms in his study of the German *Trauspiel*: “if it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too becomes properly into its own” (Benjamin 217). It is in the very same sense that, in *M. Butterfly*, in his tragic action of seppuku, Gallimard finally elevates his spirit from everything mundane and negative, becoming a tragic hero of fantastic existence, “a terrible beauty” itself, in his theatre within the theatre.

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